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Daily Interlake Newspaper_March 14, 2011_Push to block health reform concerns asbestos victims

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Push to block health reform concerns asbestos victims

By LYNNETTE HINTZE/The Daily Inter Lake Daily Inter Lake | [4 comments](#)

After Democratic Sen. Max Baucus' hard-fought battle to include provisions for Libby asbestos victims in the federal health-reform law, many of those victims are worried a move by Montana's congressman will pull the plug on their long-term care.

Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., who chairs the House budget subcommittee with jurisdiction over health-care spending, took the lead three weeks ago to defund federal health reform, introducing an amendment to a budget bill to block any spending this year on putting the new health-care law in place.

The amendment would block about \$41 million in spending to implement the federal health-reform law through September when the government's fiscal year ends.

Libby continues to deal with the aftermath of widespread death and disease prompted by toxic asbestos exposure from the former W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine near Libby. More than 300 deaths have been linked to asbestos disease, and close to 3,000 patients with various stages of asbestos disease are being treated at the Center for Asbestos Related Disease in Libby.

The federal health-care reform bill funds screening and provides Medicare coverage for Libby asbestos patients even if they're under age 65.

The measure to take money away from health-care reform, however, is unlikely to get past the Democratic-controlled Senate or the White House.

A key provision in the federal bill provides ongoing health care to all victims of public health emergencies, but Libby is the first community in the United States to get such a declaration from the federal government.

Red Busby of Libby, who is battling asbestos disease, said Rehberg's push to eliminate the health-reform funding would cause thousands of asbestos victims to lose benefits such as Medicare and a special pilot program that will help pay for medications, oxygen, doctor visits, chest X-rays, hospitalizations and end-of-life care for asbestos victims.

"If Representative Rehberg came to Libby more often, visited the CARD clinic, talked to the victims and saw their extensive medical needs and how debilitating this disease is, he wouldn't be pushing for defunding it at the expense of the health of the people of Montana," Busby said.

Tanis Hernandez, outreach coordinator at the CARD clinic, said asbestos victims already will lose two levels of government funding by the end of the year when the state Libby Asbestos Medical Plan and the Federal Libby Asbestos Specialty Health Care programs end. LAMP has provided \$2 million to Libby over the last biennium, while FLASH is operating off a \$6 million grant to provide screening and health care to victims.

"By stopping the federal bill in any way, there is no solution for long-term care," Hernandez said.

About 550 asbestos patients already had enrolled in the federal bill's Medicare coverage, and they "would be kicked off" if Rehberg is successful in throwing out the legislation, she said.

Though the CARD clinic is politically neutral, Hernandez said it's important for Libby asbestos victims to understand the implications of what could happen.

In a statement issued Friday, Rehberg said he will continue working on "reliable, stable solutions that Libby residents can count on once and for all.

"It's tragic that assistance for so many deserving folks up in Libby was tied to the anchor of Obamacare, with all of its mangled policy, unconstitutional mandates and reckless deficits," Rehberg said. "Whether it's from Congressional action or more and more court rulings declaring it unconstitutional, Obamacare is doomed."

Busby said he realizes the health-reform law isn't perfect, but he believes Rehberg needs to work with Democrats to fix the law so it reflects what people want. He lauded both Baucus' and Sen. Jon Tester's efforts to help Libby victims.

"Instead of just getting rid of it or defund it like Representative Rehberg wants, why not work with the Democrats instead of just saying no to them," Busby said.

Hernandez is encouraging Libby asbestos victims to contact Rehberg and share their concerns.

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Fyi..

~Linda

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